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E42 Elbert, Samuel Hoyt, 1907-

Symbolism in Hawaiian poetry.

(Extracted from: Etc., a review of general semantics. Bloomington, Ill., 1962. v.18, no.4, p.389-400)

1. Hawaiian poetry. 2. Symbolism in literature. I. Title.

## SYMBOLISM IN HAWAIIAN POETRY

MAY 23, 1962

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THE OBJECT of this paper is to examine some of the darkness of Hawaiian poetry, especially the symbolic portions, and to attempt to show the interrelationship of this symbolism and certain covert elements of the culture. The study will show also that symbols are not universals, that Hawaiian symbols are not the same as Euro-American ones, and that the translator's task is challengingly difficult.

The Irish poet, Padraic Colum, who wrote a book of Hawaiian fairy tales, believed that every Hawaiian poem has at least four meanings—an ostensible meaning, a vulgar meaning, a mythico-historico-topographical meaning, and a deeply-hidden meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Presumably every song has an ostensible meaning, and some, but not all, have hidden meanings. The Hawaiian name for hidden meaning is *kaona*. But why should vulgar meanings be inherent in every poem?

As for mythico-historico-topographical meanings, Colum is right in that the songs are filled with names of places and persons, some introduced because of associations, and some because of double meanings or word play.

Since the Hawaiian verbal arts are interrelated, we will be

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<sup>1</sup> Padraic Colum, "A Note on Hawaiian Poetry," *The Dial* (April 1924), p. 337.

dealing with sayings and legends to some extent, but mostly with poetry, which in Hawaiian consists of stylized utterances that are memorized and sung or chanted.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the symbols in Hawaiian poetry one must know something about the Hawaiian language and Hawaiian customs. The Hawaiian language has only thirteen segmental phonemes (interpreting long vowels as double short vowels). This is perhaps the world's smallest phonemic inventory. Further, Hawaiian has the world's simplest syllable structure, vowel or consonant vowel. The ratio of vowels to consonants in connected discourse is about sixty percent to forty percent. Almost one phoneme out of four is "a."<sup>3</sup> One would expect an abundance of homonyms and word-play and a monotony of sound. If there is monotony, it is pleasing to the Hawaiian ear, and is the basis of much of the esthetic and intellectual pleasure in listening to Hawaiian poetry. Repetition, not rhyme or exact meter, is a favorite poetic device.

Repetition is enhanced not only by the paucity of distinctive sounds, but also by the grammar. There are almost no inflections and no "irregular" verbs. A word is invariable. Mood, aspect, and voice are expressed by juxtaposition of bound morphemes to the invariable word. Generally, unchanging words function syntactically as noun, verb, adjective, and

<sup>2</sup> The songs discussed are drawn largely from printed sources, principally Nathaniel B. Emerson, *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii*, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 38 (Washington, 1909); hereinafter abbreviated UL; Samuel H. Elbert, ed., *Selections from the Fornander Collection of Hawaiian Antiquities* (Honolulu, 1959), hereinafter abbreviated F; and Samuel H. Elbert and Samuel A. Keala, *Conversational Hawaiian* (Honolulu, 1955). Most of the songs not followed by references are found in this last volume, or were taken from the published Charles E. King collections, directly from Hawaiian musicians, or from mimeographed sheets passed out at Hawaiian songfests. Most of such songs are written without glottal stops and are filled with garbles, which I have straightened out with the patient and perceptive aid of Mary Kawena Pukui, who knows more about Hawaiian songs than anyone I know of. I am indebted to her for my initiation and schooling in Hawaiian.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert, *Hawaiian-English Dictionary* (Honolulu, 1957), p. xvii.

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adverb. This gives great flexibility to the language and the monotony that is pleasing to the Hawaiian poet. And contrary to general opinion, the language is especially rich in abstractions, partly because of this flexibility.

The culture as well as the language was favorable to the development of poetry in many ways. One was the religion that saw the handiwork of the gods in flowers and plants, mist-capped mountains and ever-changing seas, creeping rains and soaring clouds. This fostered close observation of nature and imagery drawn from nature in the poetry.

Another cultural factor that encouraged poetry was the Hawaiian interest in sex. If we are to enjoy the symbolism of Hawaiian love songs we must not look upon the songs from the vantage point of nineteenth-century missionaries; we should attempt to look at sex as the Hawaiians did, as something natural and beautiful, a part of nature, the glory of youth, the source of beautiful children, and always a fine topic for conversation and singing.

IN THIS SPACE I can discuss only three areas of symbolism that occur repeatedly in Hawaiian poetry, but which to my knowledge have never been satisfactorily analyzed. The areas are rain, peace, and coolness. The three come together nicely in the song *Kane'ohe*, a song honoring the first electricity at Kane'ohe, a song that has nothing to do with rain, peace, and coolness, and one so prosaic that it mentions telegraph wires.

This is the chorus:

*Me ka ua a Pua-kea  
Ka la'i a'o Malu-lani  
Me ke anu o ke Ko'olau*

A literal translation runs: the rain of Pua-kea, the peace of Malu-lani, and the coolness of the windward.

This is all. There is no indication or hint of any *kaona*. What does this really mean?

The remainder of the paper will consist of a discussion of rain, peace, and coolness.

What does rain, *ua*, represent? Why is there so much rain

in Hawaiian songs? The sweetheart is always getting wet in the rain. Here are a few examples:

*Ka ua kilikilihune ho'opulu i ke oho o ka la'i*, "The gentle rain soaks the tender ti leaves." *Hanobano Hanalei i ka ua nui*, "The glory of Hanalei is its heavy rain." *Ohaoha wale ku'u lei i ka libau 'ia e ka ua noe*, "Lush indeed is my lei drenched by the misty rain." *'Auea wale 'oe, e Ka-ua-noe, ka ua ko'iaweawe i ke kula, ku'u hoa o ka ua lei koko 'ula*,<sup>4</sup> "Listen oh Misty-rain, shower of rain on the plains, my friend of the rain, a lei upon a scarlet net."

What is the rain?

Sometimes rain is a sign of grief. This is seen in the poetic expression of grief, *lu'ulu'u Hanalei i ka ua nui, kaumaha i ka noe o Alaka'i*, "Hanalei is bowed down in the great rain, heavy with the mists of Alaka'i." A dirge about a deceased chief refers to him as *ku'u bahu i ka ua ha'ao e*, "My lord in the showers that follow like members of a chief's retinue."

Other connotations of rain and water refer to hardships and difficulties. *Ka ua 'awa*, "the bitter rain," is a poetic reference to the difficulties and sorrows of life. Hilo even more than Hanalei is associated with rain, and according to a saying, the rain of Hilo may cease, but love for a sweetheart, never. Trouble is signified in this brief line: *He kini, he lehu kahawai o Hilo e* (F 279), "The streams of Hilo are countless, legion." This song by a hula dancer who wants to be admitted to the hula studio links rain with storms and troubles:

*Eia ka pu'u nui o waho nei la*  
*He ua, he 'ino, he anu, he ko'eko'e*  
*E ku'u aloha e*  
*Maloko aku au* (UL 39)

Great trouble outside here  
 Rain, storm, cold and chill  
 My beloved  
 Let me in

Such association of rain with grief or tumult or hardship

<sup>4</sup> Helen H. Roberts, *Ancient Hawaiian Music*, B. P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 29 (Honolulu, 1926), p. 257.

is not common. Rain is usually beloved and a symbol of happiness. In one song the hero is on the beach and sings:

*E nana ana i ka mea maika'i o uka  
'O ka ua a me ka makani anu  
Kipu ihola i he obo o ka lau ki  
Noho nani na lehua i ka la'i (F 273)*

Looking at the beautiful things of the uplands  
The rain and the cool wind  
Enfolded in young leaves of ti  
Fine *lehua* flowers sitting in the peace

Or:

*Hanohano Puna e, kebakeba i ka ua  
Kabiko mau no ia (UL 104)*

The glory of Puna, its majesty the rain  
Its everlasting finery

WHY is rain a symbol of happiness? Two reasons are sometimes given. One is that rain is considered an omen of good luck. Showers fell upon the late Samuel Wilder King as he was inaugurated as the first man of Hawaiian ancestry to serve as Governor of Hawaii. This was regarded by Hawaiians as a favorable omen. The other reason for its popularity is that rain, like other natural phenomena, was believed to be an indication of the presence of royalty. In the legend of Halemano, the supernatural sister of the hero tells her friends that as she journeys they can tell where she is by observing the weather. Rain means that she is on Moloka'i, lightning that she is on Maui, thunder at Kohala, earthquakes at Hamakua, and red rain water at Puna (F 253).

I think there are two other *kaona* to rain, and the second of these I have never seen in print. Each *kaona* is associated with the Hawaiian world view.

One is given in the famous chant about the water of Kane (UL 257-258). Kane is one of the great Hawaiian gods. The English translation that follows is somewhat abridged:

A query, a question  
I put to you  
Where is the water of Kane?  
At the east  
Where the sun enters its gate . . .  
Where is the water of Kane?  
Out by the floating sun  
Where cloud banks rest on the sea . . .  
Where is the water of Kane?  
There at sea, on the ocean  
In the showers, in the rainbow  
In rain tinted in the sun  
In low-lying rainbow . . .  
Where is the water of Kane?  
In the heavenly blue  
In the black-piled cloud  
In the black-black cloud  
In the black-mottled sacred cloud of Kane . . .  
Where flows the water of Kane?  
Deep in the ground, in the gushing spring  
In the ducts of Kane and Kanaloa  
A well spring of water to drink  
A water of divine power  
The water of life  
Oh give us this life

Rain is the water of life. This thought is inscribed above the fountain before the new Board of Water Supply building in Honolulu: *Uwe ka lani, ola ka honua*, "The heavens weep, the land lives."

That a nature-loving agricultural people cherished water is no surprise, and one must remember that in prehistoric times the dry *kona* sides of the islands were densely settled. Here water was highly prized and in the Ka'u desert the people are said to have saved dew that gathered on leaves during the night.

THE OTHER connotation of rain is less obvious. In the words *Tua* and *wai*, rain and water, there seem to be connotations of sweethearts and love-making. Or else why should love

songs be so constantly filled with rain? Here are a few examples:

*Ku'u kane o ka ua, o ka wai ho'i  
Ku'u hoa . . . pili i ke anu*

My husband of the rain and water  
My companion clinging to the coolness

In this song, as in others, the male is the rain, the female is the cold. Another example:

*Ku'u ipo i ka hale anu a ka ua  
He ua makali'i noe na ke kuahine  
Ke ho'opuehu 'ia la e ke kona*

My beloved of the cool house of rain  
Gentle rain and spraying mist  
Scattered by the *kona* wind

In this song the singer is tired of one sweetheart and is looking for another. Both sweethearts are *wai*, water:

*Pau ai ko'u libi hoihoi  
I ka wai 'awili me ke kai  
Ke 'ono hou nei ku'u pu'u  
I ka wai hu'ihu'i o ka uka  
Wai hone i ke kumu o ka pali  
I malu i ka lau kukui (UL 251)*

Finished my pleasure  
In fresh water mixed with salt water  
Now my desire craves  
Cool waters of the uplands  
Water running at the base of cliffs  
Sheltered by *kukui* leaves

Sometimes the *kaona* are anything but veiled, even in songs frequently sung on the radio, as this, called *Aloha no au i ko maka*, which is sung to the tune of *I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now*:

*Aloha no au i ko maka  
Ko ibu waliwali ka'u e honihoni*



*Koe aku ko piko wai 'olu  
 Ua kapu no ka mea waiwai*

I love your eyes  
 Your soft nose for me to kiss  
 Kept apart is the cool liquid of the private parts  
 The precious thing that is so *kapu*

The tourists are told that the following song (dating from the 1860's) is a war chant, in fact, *the* Hawaiian war chant. Instead it is a naughty love song:

*Kaua i ka huahua'i  
 E 'uhene la i pili ko'olua  
 Pukuku'i lua i ke ko'eko'e  
 Hanu lipo o ka palai  
 Auwe ka hua'i la (UL 165)*

We two in passionate outpour  
 Giggling, clinging two and two  
 Embracing tightly in the coolness  
 Breathing deep of *palai* fern  
 Oh such spray

Missionaries did not like such songs. Today they do not mind because they think the words are about warfare.

The second verse in the chorus of the song about Kane'ohe may be translated "the peace of heavenly shelter." The two common words for peace are *la'i* and *malu*. In many songs there is no *kaona* to *la'i*, as in the phrase *ka la'i o Kona*, "the calmness of the lee." But very often in the songs *la'i* is coupled with the word *kaunu*, which means the thrill of love making. *La'i* in this context is peace and relaxation after passion.

*'Elua no maua  
 'Ike ia hana  
 La'i wale ke kaunu  
 Ho'onipo i ka poli*

We two  
 Feel the effects

Passion calmed  
Love making in the heart

I have heard this song, which is called *Hot Fire (Ahi wela)*, sung by little girls of eight or nine in playground festivals. Does it seem appropriate?

Kalakaua, the merry monarch and *bon vivant*, was not subtle in his use of the word *la'i* in his song, *Koni au*, in praise of gin:

*'Akahi ho'i au la 'ike  
I na la'i 'elua  
'Elua maua i ka la'i la  
Wai kapipi i ka pali*

Finally I have known  
Twofold peace  
We two in peace  
Liquid spattering on the cliff

THE WORD *pali*, literally precipice, sometimes refers to a handsome physique, and a cliché praising a handsome youth or girl is *pali ke kua, mahina ke alo*, "Back a cliff, front a moon." In this same song of Kalakaua's is this further reference to peace:

*Kai hawanawana i ka la'i la  
I ka la'i wale a'o Wai-'alua  
'Olu ai ka nobona o ka la'i*

Sea whispers of peace  
Peace of two-waters  
Refreshing way to relax

A last example clearly links peace and passion. This is in the song *Kananaka*, composed in about the 1920's.

*'O ka pa konane a ka mahina  
Ho'ola'ila'i ana i ka po la'i  
Konikoni ana i ka iwi hilo*

The moon shines brightly  
Bringing peace to this night of peace  
Throbbing in the thigh bones

"Thigh bones" are poetic in Hawaiian, if not in English.

The third symbol in the Kane'ohe chorus is the cold, usually *anu*. We have had numerous examples already of cold because one seldom sings of rain without coolness.

Translators usually give the western idea of cold in their translations. Is this always right? In some songs there is indeed merely joy in coolness in a hot climate, as in this song in praise of Hanalei:

*'O Hanalei 'aina ua  
'Aina anuanu, 'aina ko'eko'e (F 97)*

Hanalei, land of rain  
Cool land, chilly land

Coolness is connected with fear in this reference to the physical effects of fear: *i li ai ka 'i'o i ke anuanu ame ka bu'ihu'i o ka maka'u (F 93)*, "The flesh chilled with the coolness and cold of fear."

In this song the connection of coolness is with passion, an idea very strange to us.

*He makemake no au e 'ike maka  
I ho'okahi no po, le'a ke kaunu  
He hana mao 'ole a ke anu  
He anu mawaho, a he bu'i maloko  
A i laila laua la, la'i pono iho  
Ua pono 'oe o kaula, aia alu ka moena (UL 184)*

I want to feel  
At night the joy of passion  
Coolness that never stills  
Cool without, chilled within  
Two by two, and then peace  
You are right, I am here, a mat relaxed

In the next song the coolness is a girl, who accompanied by her brother, Kumukahi, is abducted by the singer:

'O ka la hiki anuanu ma Kumukahi  
 'Akahi ka mea aloha o ka wahine  
 Ke hele nei a wela ku'u manawa  
 A hu'ihu'i ku'u piko i ke aloha  
 He 'ai'e ku'u kino na ia la e (F 277)

The day the coolness comes with Kumukahi  
 Nothing so fine as love of a woman  
 My breath is hot  
 My private parts are cold in love  
 My body is in her debt

In the following song the coolness is the female, and the rain is the male. The female sings:

Ua la'i nobo'i 'oe e ka ua lanipili  
 Pili 'ia e maua ka ua me ke ko'eko'e  
 I mehana ho'i au i ko leo e ka hoa

You have found peace, o torrential rain  
 The two of us together, rain and coolness  
 I am warmed by your voice, o friend

Can one translate *anu* in the following by cold? This is a *bula ku'i*, a vigorous stamping dance and song of exultation:

Ua anu na pua o ka laina  
 Ka wahine nobo anu o ke kula (UL 251)

The flowers in the rows are so cold  
 The woman of the plains is so cold

Could the translator change cold to impassioned or inflamed?

This song, *Cold Breast*, written in the 1860's, has the same connotations. The word *ma'e'ele* occurs, and this is defined in the Pukui-Elbert dictionary as "numb with cold or deeply moved by love." Emerson gives a straight translation, which I am rephrasing:

<i>Aloha wale 'oe</i>	<i>He anu e ka ua</i>	<i>Ina paha</i>
<i>Poli anuanu</i>	<i>He anu e ka wai</i>	<i>'O 'oe a 'o wau</i>
<i>Ma'e'ele au</i>	<i>L'a ku'u 'ili</i>	<i>Ka i pukuku'i</i>
<i>I ke anu e</i>	<i>I ke anu e</i>	<i>I ke anu e (UL 165)</i>

Hello	Rain is cold	What of
Cold Breast	Water is cold	You and me
I am numb	My skin is chilled	Embracing
With cold	With cold	In the cold

Emerson complains about the lack of intelligibility of translations of Hawaiian songs "it matters not how faithful" (UL 59). There lies the trouble. What can a translator do with rain, peace, and cold? In the Kane'ohe chorus, rain, peace and coolness are descriptive of windward Oahu, with its coolness and wet verdure and quiet peace. But as has been indicated, interpretation is not always this simple. Here is ample place for Freudian psychologists and imaginative artists who know Hawaiian thought and have the audacity to face life in the Hawaiian way.